

EXCERPT



Doing Asian American Theology *A Contextual Framework for Faith and Practice*

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Daniel D. Lee (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) is the academic dean of the Center for Asian American Theology and Ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary, where he also teaches and researches in the area of theology and Asian American studies. He is the author of *Double Particularity: Karl Barth, Contextuality, and the Asian American Theology*. He lives in Temple City, California with his wife, Judy, and their three daughters.

Contextuality and Particularity

At an Asian American conference, after presenting a survey of current scholarship on Asian American theology, the speaker asked the attendees, mostly Asian American pastors: *Is this helpful? Do we need this?* While the speaker phrased the question as one of usefulness, underlying it was the question of the legitimacy and place of Asian American theology. He was not asking a rhetorical question but truly wondering whether we need an Asian American theology. His question, a common one, exposes the deep and widespread misunderstanding about the nature of the theological task in general, and the task of Asian American theology in particular.

This chapter is a non-apology for the existence of Asian American theologies. I offer no justification or defense for the existence and the importance of Asian American theologies, no answer to the question of whether Asian American theologies deserve attention, because the basic premise of that question is fundamentally flawed. I will, however, lay out the nature of theology, as it relates to questions about contextuality, normativity, and the dynamic tension between particularity and universality. In understanding the nature of theology, we will be able to understand how the task of Asian American theology fits into the broader global and multiethnic landscape.

The notion of theology being an objective science is faulty because God is a living person and not a dead artifact. This reality that every theology is contextual is not new. Stephen Bevans, for example, points to a number of external sociopolitical and internal theological factors for theology being contextual (*Models of Contextual Theology*). While the concept of contextualization first arose out of missiology where the need for translation of the gospel was pressing, the growing global consciousness made it clear that no one was culture free. That realization served as a catalyst for missiologists to rethink the nature of theology.

Unfortunately, the label “contextual” remains in many theological circles and minds as a descriptor separating out non-Western, Majority World theologies or non-White theologies in the US. Theologies bearing this label might be relegated to the hinterlands of missiology or be seen as pertinent only in discussions about “global” or “liberation” theology. A common misunderstanding about “contextual theology” or “contextualization” is that people often mean a universal kernel of truth or gospel that is simply clothed in various cultures. The problem with this conceptualization of theology is that the White European tradition is often assumed to be this universal core theology, as though it is acontextual or neutral.

Since all theology is contextual, although some are implicitly while others are explicitly, we could just drop the contextual label altogether. Instead of “contextual” as a label, I propose that we use the concept of “contextuality” as a category that applies to all theologies, describing the manner in which every theology is situated and engages their context.

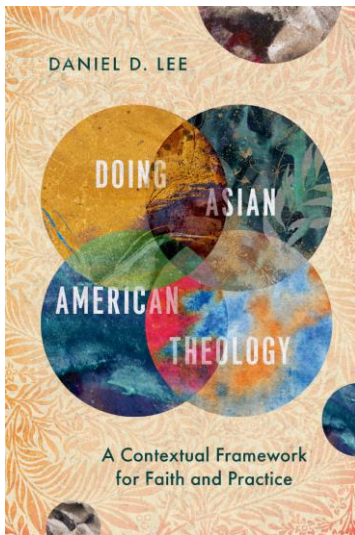
This contextuality could be understood as a human limitation that we must work to move beyond. In that case, we might argue either that we are tragically bound by human limitations of cognition and perception or socio-politically determined to be ideologically disposed. We might also frame contextuality in terms of human need, or practical necessity to make the theology and the Bible relevant to different situations around the world. Instead of cultural and sociopolitical reasoning, I am interested in the theological understanding of contextuality as rooted in the very identity of God.



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There are two popular versions of theological contextuality, namely incarnation and Pentecost (Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*).

In terms of the incarnation, the Word becoming flesh is too universalistic to serve as theological grounds for contextuality. There is no significance to the differentiation of various flesh, as in particular human embodiments, or even flesh in a general sense, including, for example, animals as well (David L. Clough, *On Animals, Volume 1: Systematic Theology*). Also, this is an analogical argument, not a proper theological one because properly speaking there is only one incarnation. If analogically we argue that the “incarnational” dynamic occurs in every culture or context, it is the same eternal Word in every contextual incarnation. This eternal Word in differing flesh is the support for theological contextuality as *translation*; in this case, Asian American bodies, communities, and cultures are merely husks that have no impact on the kernel that is the Word. There is a static superficiality to contextuality in that God is not impacted at all. God says the same thing but in a different language in a sense. Does God say or do something different when interacting within a certain context?

Pentecost offers another perspective on theological contextuality. Here the outpouring of the Spirit “upon all flesh” (Acts 2:17) could be interpreted in terms of universality; however, the speaking of many tongues leads to a “divinely ordered diversity and pluralism” (Amos Yong, *The Future of Evangelical Theology*). Through linguistic diversity, cultural and religious diversities could also be taken up as theologically significant as well (Yong, *The Future of Evangelical Theology*). Willie Jennings contends that Pentecost should be interpreted as speaking the language of another instead of one’s own, thereby expressing new kinship and intimacy across identities (*The Christian Imagination*). A possible concern here is that this version of contextuality accentuates foreignness, emphasizing the exoticism of Asian language and culture. While perhaps appropriate for the global context, stressing language and culture tends to orientalize Asian Americans. What about the particular experiences of Asian Americans that are not cultural or linguistic but rather political or sociological, that is, marginality or invisibility?

While accepting the benefits and insights of the incarnation and Pentecost, I propose God’s revelation as a covenantal God as the ground of theological contextuality. In proposing God’s being as covenantal, I am stating that God sees and interacts with every people and every person in their particularity, for their reconciliation and vocation. Our relationship with this living God is an I-Thou encounter (Martin Buber, *I and Thou*). Jewish philosopher Martin Buber knew the danger of objectifying God, making the eternal Thou into an It. We can so easily reduce our living God into ideas or concepts, whether they be a worldview, law, morality, or even love or grace. More education or knowledge does not necessarily protect us from this danger of theological abstraction. Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns that the first theological question was asked by the serpent, inquiring about God in the third person as an object of our study (*Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 3). It is always tempting to think of God as an idea that we can grasp, rather than a free person that we must attend to. Rather than a universal idea or an abstract concept, our God is “the God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and savants” as Blaise Pascal would confess (*Pensées*). Another way of expressing this I-Thou relationality is to confess that our God is a covenantal God. This covenantal God is alive and not dead, actively working and interacting with us and the world.

—Taken from chapter one, “Contextuality and Particularity”



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